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## Love Learning in Porous Skin

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# **Love Learning in Porous Skin**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

Sarah Coote

MFA, Painting + Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, 2017

BFA, Painting, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, 2013

Thesis Advisor: Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor, Painting + Printmaking Department

Committee: Hilary Wilder, Cara Benedetto, Gregory Volk

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## **Abstract**

Love Learning in Porous Skin

By Sarah Coote, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University 2017

Thesis Advisor: Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor, Painting + Printmaking Department

My thesis questions our construction of identity through objects. In small sculptures and paintings with collage and various found materials, I insist on the touch and intimacy that our bodies afford us in the world saturated with surface content, screens, and digital profiles. My criticism is self-reflective and curious, an attempt based in research and process in hopes of understanding further the complexities of absorbing in a body and dressing a surface. I have been focused on the formative years of growing up with objects and tools that shaped a concept of individual self and how the imposition of the “ideal” feminine surface affected my understanding of love, intimacy and sexuality.

## Love Learning in Porous Skin

*Is it idle to fault a net for having holes, my encyclopedia notes.*

In this way you can have your empty church with a dirt floor swept clean of dirt and your spectacular stained glass gleaming by the cathedral rafters, both. Because nothing you say can fuck up the space for God.<sup>1</sup>

- Maggie Nelson, *Argonauts*

### ***I have many holes.***

Seeking pleasure, absorbing pleasures, knowing the pain in seeking. To use the domestic space, the sites of eating, cleaning, of my mothers, of labor, is the frame for the work in context of a body. I transform the usage of tools. I source my autobiographical experience to find images that reflect living in the world with multiple holes - eyes, slits, lids and lips.

My practice questions our construction of identity through objects. In small sculptures and paintings with collage and various found materials, I insist on the touch and intimacy that our bodies afford us in the world saturated with surface content, screens, and digital profiles. My criticism is self-reflective and curious, an attempt based in research and process in hopes of understanding further the complexities of absorbing in a body and dressing a surface. To subvert internalized misogyny and thwart self-harm, through play and embracing the personal, my practice relies on the connections between pain and pleasure. I have been focused on the formative years of growing up with objects and tools that shaped a concept of individual self and how the imposition of the “ideal” feminine surface affected my understanding of love, intimacy and sexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2015.

## Medusa Laughing, Dangerous Pleasure

*Flee, for if your eyes are petrified in amazement, she will turn you to stone.<sup>2</sup>*  
*She was the past, present and future: 'all that has been, that is, and that will be'<sup>3</sup>*

"I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement."<sup>4</sup>



Zuleika Ponsen as 'Medusa' - By Pierre et Gilles, 1990

This is the opening paragraph in Helene Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa*. It is an influential text in my work, for its insistence on using one's voice, and an insistence on

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<sup>2</sup> Fossi, Gloria. *Uffizi*. Prato, Italy: Giunti Industrie Grafiche S.p.A, 2004 (p. 530)

<sup>3</sup> Walker, Barbara. *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893, The University of Chicago Press

writing with one's body, specifically the woman's body. In the text she calls for the woman to write through her body and uses the story of Medusa as an example of subverting history through voice: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."<sup>5</sup>



*Medusa Laughing*, 44 x 64 inches, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 2017

Medusa was the serpent-goddess of the Libyan Amazons, representing 'female wisdom' and was covered by a veil that no person could remove at risk of death. As Barbara Walker writes in her *Encyclopedia of Women's Myths and Secrets*, "She was death, and

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<sup>5</sup> <sup>5</sup> Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893, The University of Chicago Press

to see her face to face was to die — that is, to be ‘turned to stone’ as a funerary statue. She was veiled also because she was the Future, which always wears a veil. Medusa had magic blood that could create and destroy life; this she represented the dreaded life- and death-giving moon blood of women.” Cixous’ interjection and subversion of this mythological story has woven in the woman’s voice to redefine how we identify Medusa as a character.

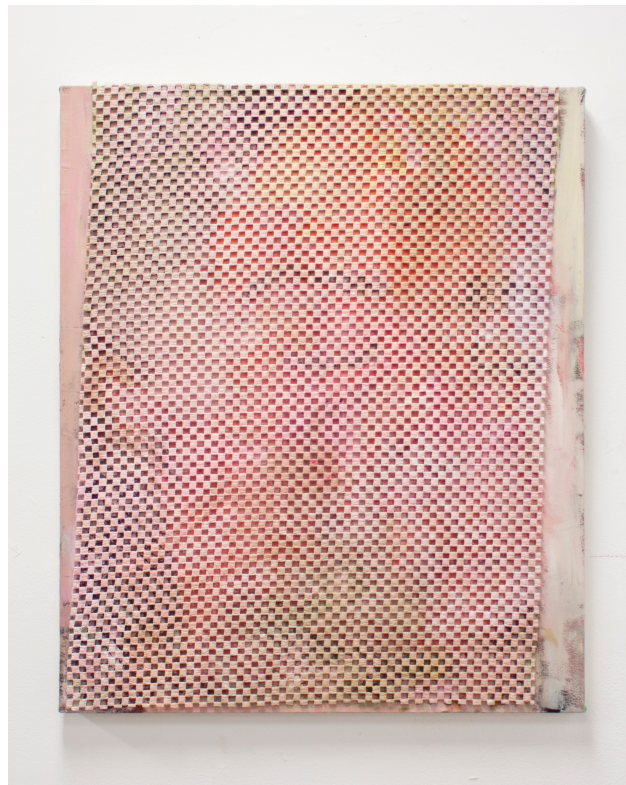


Still from 1970's "Happy Fuckday"

In the painting *Medusa Laughing*, I sourced imagery from my favorite pornographic film from the 1970's, *Happy Fuckday* and painted Medusa using assembled parts and cut descriptions of eye and mouth. The imagery is taken from this particular film because of the action unfolding in the opening scene it is the woman’s birthday and she’s blowing



out her cake presented by the two hunky hairy men sitting on either end of her; she makes a wish for both of them, and they give it to her. Throughout the film clip, she is a receiver, the submissive by her own authority and birthday wish. The power in her orgasm, though acted, is a representation that I have repeatedly used in my work. In *Medusa Laughing*, I collaged both the porn still from the orgasm scene and an imagined portrait inspired by Medusa's mythology.



*Blushing (I Imagine Myself Deeply Loved)*, 25 x 30 inches, acrylic and rubber on canvas, 2016

The painting, *Blushing (I Imagine Myself Deeply Loved)* is a veiled portrait of a woman. It is also a painting about the screen, the dissolve of a full image, and the covering uncovered. The use of the screen in reference to Medusa is a means of denying access to see. *Blushing (I Imagine Myself Deeply Loved)* was made with many layers of

previous paintings behind the final image. When a rubber rug mat was laid on top of the portrait and paint was added, it felt like applying makeup to the canvas. I relate this feeling to something Gina Beavers said in conversation with Gwendolyn Zabicki for *Figure/Ground*, “When I started with these paintings I was really thinking that this painting is looking at you while it is painting itself. It’s drawing and painting: it has pencils, it has brushes, and it’s trying to make itself appealing to the viewer. It’s about that parallel between a painting and what you expect from it as well as desire and attraction.”<sup>6</sup> I love this relationship between the self-conscious image, the subject, and the audience. For *Blushing*, the hidden eyes of the subject are passive and protected. They are covered, the image is dissolved, and the powdered matte pigment is caked on top.



Gina Beavers, *Pictorial loves*, 2015

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<sup>6</sup> Gwendolyn Zabicki, “A Conversation with Gina Beavers.” *Figure/Ground*, February 16, 2016.

## **Teaching Tools**

Growing up in the late 1990's and early 2000's, social media, technology, and pornography were pivotal to adolescent discovery of self. Chat rooms, AOL instant messenger, and profile pages were sites for learning and experimentation. I would spend hours after everyone went to bed in the house, talking to strangers online, relishing in the attention I wanted, to feel validated at the expense of being used. Like the artist Ann Hirsh said in an interview, "I didn't feel like I could be a sexual person. AOL was a way for me to do that, but in a shameful, secretive kind of way."<sup>7</sup> The experimentation and access to sexual content is a huge part of the privacy and personal space the internet allows. In 2005, the average age of first Internet exposure to pornography was 11 years old, and there were 244,661,900 pornographic web pages in the United States (89% of the world's supply)<sup>8</sup>. For myself and my peers this had an effect on the ways we dressed, shaved, branded ourselves online, and questioned our power in comparison to the heteronormative male-dominated fantasies we were presented but were never publicly talked about. Pornography is as much of a teaching tool as it is a source for escapist pleasures. As Peggy Orenstein describes it: "Honest conversations between adults and teenagers about what happens after yes remain rare. And while we are more often telling children that both parties must agree unequivocally to a sexual encounter, we still tend to avoid the biggest taboo of all: women's capacity for and entitlement to sexual pleasure."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Saner, Emine. "Digital artist Ann Hirsch on why her 'singing vagina' empowers women – and terrifies men", The Guardian, March 21, 2016

<sup>8</sup> Ropelato, Jerry. "Internet Pornography Statistics", Associated Press, 2013

<sup>9</sup> Orenstein, Peggy. "When did Porn Become Sex-Ed?". New York, NY: New York Times, March 19, 2016.

### ***Licking the Back***

I use veils, clear plastics and nettings to build bodily density and skin surfaces on canvas. Layering and collaging these materials over one another and painting with acrylic paint is a process that builds a tactile space for touch on a surface for looking. The paintings engage with a bodily sense of experience, reflecting on imperfections and collected filth and particles that are washed and transferred to other tools for wiping. The full presentation and collection of paintings operates as an assemblage of parts to make up a larger whole in the construction of my identity through bodily pleasures and objects.



*Licks*, 44 x 64 inches, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 2017 and Crop of *Medusa Laughing*

I am using shower curtains, rug mats and sheer curtains to build density on the surface of the canvas. Combining these materials over one another and painting with acrylic is a process that creates a tactile space for looking. The objects perform acts of containment like holding a rug in place, keeping the water inside the tub, collecting paint and protecting a floor from stains and keeping the shade in. I either gather these materials from home or buy them at thrift stores. I like to be surrounded by all the materials so I can make fast decisions on the canvas.

In the painting, *Licks*, there is a series of cut tongues coming from open mouths licking the inside of the plastic surface covering the canvas. The piece is made with multiple layers of plastics and shower curtains, cut, painted and covered. The tongues are encased in a shallow display referencing product wrapping as they push against it with their material, resulting in many licks. This piece is a collage of layers. I cut the flaps out and cover them with the intention of building a density on the canvas that would promote space through and on the surface.

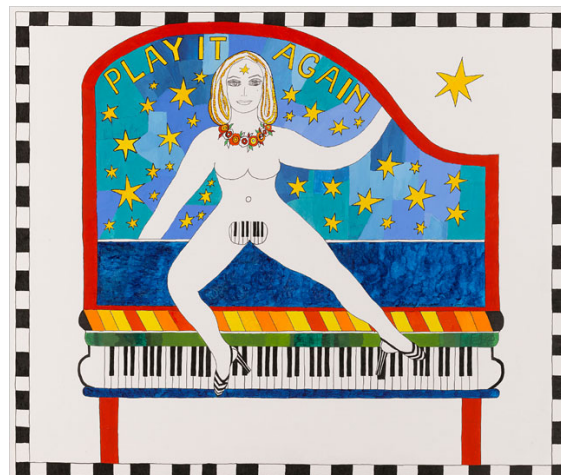
The flaps and holes create portals into and onto other surfaces. The use of caricature in the representation of the mouths is something that came about naturally within a playful process of making the painting. Thinking about mouths: the risks of an open mouth, the invitation, the tease, and the cheeky tongue, it came naturally to describe it with all the necessary marks. The shorthand description is influenced by artists such as Dorothy Iannone and Julie Doucet.



Both artists use personal narratives in their work, and through explicit and unabashed description speak openly to their experiences of sexuality and relationships. Julie Doucet is a Canadian comic book artist, known for her underground zine comic series, *Dirty Plotte*, which ran from 1991-98. Dorothy Iannone is an American artist noted for her films and paintings that, as described by critic Karen Rosenberg, “advocate ‘ecstatic unity,’ most often achieved through lovemaking.”<sup>10</sup>



Julie Doucet “Dirty Plotte” issue #1, June 1992



Dorothy Iannone, Play it Again, Gouache on Paper, 2007

<sup>10</sup> Rosenberg, Karen. “An Iconoclast Who Valorizes the Erotic and Ecstatic”, New York Times, New York, July 30, 2009.

CVS as a resource (tell me what you really really want)

The Early 2000's Popular Girl in High School starter pack.



11

How we present ourselves is an extension of inner expression and feelings of self-worth but also a reflection of the context where we consume products and media. I relate this to an interview Kathy Acker conducted with the Spice Girls for an issue of Vogue in 1997. In it, she remarks on the rise of individualism. As she is interviewing the girls they are insistent on their personalities, of their individual selves and Acker, too, notes their distinct characteristics in her descriptions of them. However, she is obviously skeptical of the ways these pop stars describe themselves as five in a group, rather than a collective, collaborative band representing “girl power” and pro-sex feminism.

“I can’t keep up with these Girls. My generation, spoon-fed Marx and Hegel, thought we could change the world by altering what was out there - the political and economic configurations, all that seemed to make history. Emotions and personal - especially sexual - relationships were for girls, because girls were unimportant. Feminism changed this landscape; in England, the advent of Margaret Thatcher, sad to say, changed it more. The individual self became more important than the world. To my generation, this signals the rise of selfishness; for the generation of the Spice Girls, self-consideration and self-analysis are political. When the Spices say, 'We’re five completely separate people,' they’re talking politically.”

I am critical of the Spice Girls’ enterprise within a capitalism frame and how ‘Girl Power’ was co-opted from the Riot Grrrl punk movements in the 1990’s for product



consumption<sup>11</sup>, but I appreciate Acker's voice and reflection on the shifts in feminism to reflect the power in the woman's voice and sexual experience. "If any of this speculation is valid, then it is up to feminism to grow, to take on what the Spice Girls, and women like them, are saying, and to do what feminism has always done...to keep on transforming society as society is best transformed, with lightness and in joy."<sup>12</sup>



Photo of Kathy Acker with the Spice Girls during their 1997 Interview

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<sup>11</sup> "Originally, of course, girl power was never meant to be consumer friendly; it was supposed to stick in the mainstream's craw. When Riot Grrrls rehabilitated the word girl in the early '90s, they were looking back to the wild, unsocialized tomboys of prepubescence for inspiration—chiming with sociologist Carol Gilligan's idea that adolescence is a calamity for female confidence and self-esteem. Riot Grrrls had seen firsthand, through their mothers, that being a grown woman involves making awful choices and sacrifices. Whereas girls still had all options open to them—none of life's roads were blocked off yet." (Press, Joy. "Notes on Girl Power" Village Voice, New York, NY, September 23, 1997.)

<sup>12</sup> Acker, Kathy. "All Girls Together", Vogue Magazine, New York, NY 1997

## ***Porous Paintings***



Porous Paintings on table with various studio props, 2017

The *Porous Paintings* are the conduits for soaking up and holding accessories and dressings sold as feminine or used for a woman's body. They are made from sponges as well as decorative elements and personal artifacts. The sponge is a porous and soft

material, it soaks up liquid and wipes away dirt. You touch a sponge, you carry the sponge, and squeeze the sponge. The sponge applies makeup dust, wipes filth, and provides contraceptive protection. It is soft when it's wet, harder when dry, and depending on what is being soaked up changes its texture over time. The specific sponges I am using are industrial grouting sponges, used to wipe away mortar from tiles when filling in the cracks between, and to clean large surface areas.



*Porous Painting (stained and soaking), 2016 & Porous Painting (what's in a name), 2016*

When decorated, dressed, pierced and stuffed with various materials and feminine accessories, tools for comfort and hygiene, the sponges become both containers and surfaces. They become bodies and collectors of the particles left behind on the counter.



The kitchen gathers wear so you return to the sponge, which now holds filth from last night, the ghosts of those who scratched the skin cells off their face, dandruff falling on the countertop, dried rice kernels from last night's dinner, dust from outside. The particles of place, person and thing are wiped away and soaked up by a sponge and that sponge is the source for all of these micro parts to come together. In their decor, the *Porous Paintings* role-play as beautified objects, dirty things made pretty.



The jeweled skeleton of St. Benedictus, photo by Paul Koudounaris

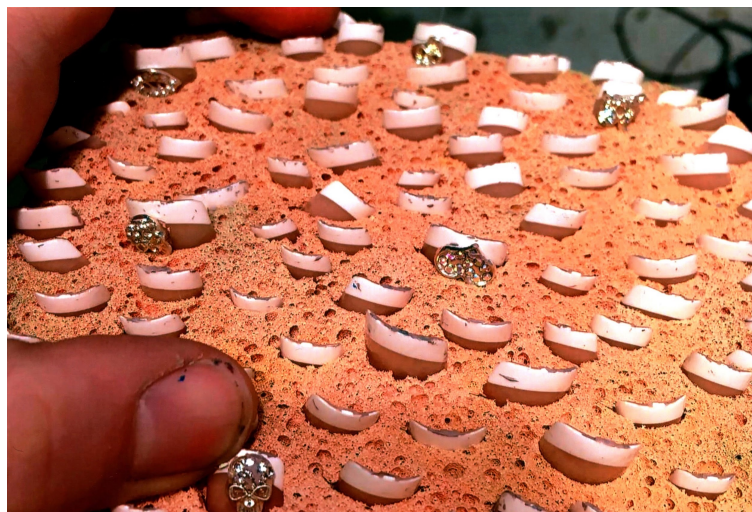


Image of *Porous Painting (French Tips)*, 7 x 5 x 2 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2017

A source of visual research comes from the Christian reliquary object. Christian relics were usually a part of the physical remains of a saint. Worshippers would contemplate relics as a means of getting closer to both God and the saint's powers, as they were associated with miraculous powers of healing. The use of iconography plays a role in these objects, as "a conventional mode of representing without the supposition that natural resemblance is involved... through iconographic conventions, identifications and comments are made through conventional signals."<sup>13</sup>



*Porous Painting (cranberry pills)*, 7 x 4 x 2 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2016 and *Porous Painting (stained and soaking)*, 7 x 5 x 2 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2016

I use found materials to decorate the sponges, which operate as surrogate bodies, vessels for decor and addition. These pieces become shrines to the filthy feminine bodily experience, the lived body. They are altars celebrating personal grief and moments creating content through symbol and associative dressings. The decor is often

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<sup>13</sup> McEvelley, Thomas. "Art & Discontent: Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", New York, NY: McPherson & COMPANY, 1991

grotesque and stained, used or stuffed inside. So like the reliquary object, the site of worship and healing, a place of belief in object, the *Porous Paintings* become sites for metaphor. The used panty gussets ornamented with gold beading in *Porous Painting (Stained and Soaking)* dress the sponge with a patchwork jester attire stained with vaginal discharge collected over months of use. *Porous Painting (Cranberry Pills)* is now a container for preventative urinary tract care and celebrator of woman's sexual activity — a shrine to the risks of pain for the sake of pleasure. Some sponges' holes are filled in, some are pierced, and some have extra larger holes cut out. They become vessels for keeping things inside, for displaying and hiding goods, for shameful tucking and outward presentations of costume.



*Dickies*, 25 x 30 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2017 & *Porous Painting (French Tips)*, 7 x 5 x 2 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2017

When making these pieces I am responding intuitively to the products I have in my bathroom and on my bedroom shelf. In the studio they become materials for collage. Sometimes I use the sponges as tools for making the paintings, as is the case for



*Porous Painting (French Tips)* that was used to make *Dickies*. The formal relationships between the paintings on canvas and the *Porous Paintings* are contingent upon the ways they interact as objects as well as their shared palettes, processes and materials. The *Porous Paintings* take much longer to make but often are the sketches for the larger works, *Medusa Laughing* and *Licks* among them. To jump between the crafting table and the easel promotes levity and playful discovery.

My Grandma Pamela taught high school home economics in England during the 1950's - 1970's. She was a survivor of the London bombings, sent to different homes as a foster child. As a result of her experience, and the lingering effects of the war, she has saved everything. When I was younger she showed me how to hand sew and pick raspberries for making jam. Christmas is also known as the first day of the Turkey, starting with the meat at dinner on the 25th and ending on the tenth day with a broth made from bones. She still takes care of her dollhouse in the living room, one of her prized possessions. For birthdays she would occasionally gift me a candleholder or other home good for my own dollhouse.

As I started working on the *Porous Paintings* I thought of her, and how crafting became therapeutic in the studio<sup>14</sup>. The *Porous Paintings* and other paintings made on canvas both employ a process of responding to materials with different paces. The sponges are decorated slowly. I'm usually watching entire seasons of television dramas while making

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<sup>14</sup> Crafting can help those who suffer from anxiety, depression or chronic pain, experts say. It may also ease stress, increase happiness and protect the brain from damage caused by aging. In a CNN article, [Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) first described this phenomenon as flow: a few moments in time when you are so completely absorbed by an activity that nothing else seems to matter. Flow, Csikszentmihalyi says, is the secret to happiness -- a statement he supports with decades of research. (Wilson, Jacque. "This is your brain on crafting", CNN, January 5, 2015)

them over the course of 3-5 hours. The process is relaxing and repetitive. When I started making these works I was feeling disenchanted with my paintings and was going through a period of personal grief and self-harm. I have always enjoyed crafting as a meditative activity.



Porous Painting (handy), mixed media with sponge, 2016



## Shallow Theaters, Dollhouses & Shrines

My visual research comes from looking at store displays and religious altars, counter shrines and shallow theaters where one identifies through objects and arrangement. I grew up playing with a dollhouse, spending hours moving tiny furniture and handmade clay food plates, never playing with the dolls (it was a 'mouse house' so they were play mice) but rather organizing spaces for future fictional use and imagining what would happen there. When I arranged tiny furniture or switched out felt carpets, I entered another universe.



Alter of Santo Niño in Mexico City



Antique English Dollhouse

This private sphere of indulgence became an addictive site of management and as I learned in my research, the social history of dollhouses is at odds with the idea that dollhouses are spaces of emotion, freedom, and imagination. They have historically been used as sites of control and teaching, sites for teaching girls household tasks in

the miniature: “where girls would learn to become the lady of the house”.<sup>15</sup> These spaces of control and play are ingrained in the experience of anyone who walks into a grocery store or CVS or down the street through a church garden and sees altars of worship. Many people identify with objects and find comfort in exhibiting organization when we feel like we don’t have any in our chaotic human experience.



Studio image of *Porous Paintings* arranged

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<sup>15</sup> In the beginning, dollhouses had only two purposes: display and pedagogy. First built in the 17th century in northern Europe, primarily in Germany, Holland, and England, dollhouses were designed for adults. They were closely associated with wealth and served as markers of social class and status. Beginning in the 17th century, “Nuremberg kitchens” might contain a hearth, cooking pots, a straw broom. Used as teaching tools for girls, Nuremberg kitchens allowed mothers to show daughters how to set up and control a house. All about learning rules, a Nuremberg kitchen was the opposite of a dollhouse as a dream world of fantasy. It was a place where girls learned to manage not only the objects of the house but also its servants, where girls would learn to become the lady of the house...Changing definitions of childhood in the beginning of the 19th century shifted ideas about play. But it took the industrial revolution and the increase in mass-produced objects to make dollhouses and miniatures begin to be construed as toys. (Cooley, Nicole. “The History of Dollhouses”, The Atlantic, July 22, 2016)

### ***Looking at Men, Love Learning***

*July 2014* is a painting of a man's back as he rests on a fence in warm weather. The image is taken from a photo of an ex-lover. All of the grief and learning afforded during that relationship are expressed in the marks on his back. I hate him, I love him, I miss him, he disgusts me. In July 2014 we broke up. *Morning* and *New Orleans* are other portraits of different men, in moments of calm, reacting to the camera, to us, and to a conversation we are a part of.



*July 2014*, 44 x 54 inches, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 2016 & *Morning*, 44 x 54 inches, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 2016

These intimate relationships allowed me to take the photos used as source imagery for the paintings. The observation and viewpoint are heightened through the actions of cropping the image, zooming in on areas of the body which are afforded to the gaze of a lover, in the morning during dressing, or in moments of leisure. The repeated gestures



are important, rather than the individual identity markers of names or faces. I enjoy working with just enough information. Attitudinal gesture is displayed in the image and in the emotional tenor in the mark. The subject is the relationship between the audience and the painted figure, rather than the individual identity of the painted body.



*New Orleans*, 44 x 54 inches, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 2016

The drive to make these paintings is fueled by a curiosity to feel whole through a collection of parts, to perform power even if it doesn't feel comfortable or real. To pretend. While making these paintings and sourcing images, I was considering a quote from Eileen Myles, in an essay she wrote called "Being Female": "When I think about

being female I think about being loved... A mother loves her son. And so does a country. And this is much to count on. So I try to conjure that for myself particularly when I'm writing or saying something that seems both vulnerable and important so I don't have to be defending myself so hard. I try and act like it's mine. The culture. That I'm its beloved son. It's not impossible to conceit. But it's hard. Because a woman, reflexively, often feels unloved."<sup>16</sup>

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Source cell phone imagery of men for paintings

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<sup>16</sup> Eileen Myles, "Being Female", The Awl, Feb 14, 2011.

***Paul, Doug, Sam, Mark, David***

In *Porous Painting (what's in a name?)* I collected name tags with the names of lovers and other men I've known. I stuffed the tags along the edges of the cut rectangle in the middle of the sponge. I used to do this with candy wrappers at my parent's house when I was younger, shamefully tucking my sweet evidence away to be secretly moved to the garbage can after my family left the kitchen. In this way these names inside the sponge are absorbed inside the body. I've applied my memories to the text inscribed on their surfaces.



*Porous Painting (what's in a name?)*, 7.5 x 5.25 x 2.25 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2016

*Porous Painting (what's in a name?)* is dealing with healing and shame. The name tags are not visible or legible, and their exposure is tentative. I am revealing my reluctance to

let them go. I am tucking in the memories of these people in my sponge to be absorbed. I considered Sophie Calle's 2009 show at Paula Cooper Gallery, *Take Care of Yourself* when making this piece. The issue of healing through making these objects is relevant as it is in Calle's work, but my direction is self-reflective.



Still from video piece from Sophie Calle 'Take Care of Yourself'

Calle collaborated with 107 women, inviting them to interpret a breakup e-mail she received by a lover in order to repeat and disarm the power of the individual's language and process the loss<sup>17</sup>. In *Porous Painting (what's in a name?)* the names are sitting in

<sup>17</sup>

*I received an email telling me it was over.  
I didn't know how to respond.  
It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.  
It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself."  
And so I did.*

*I asked 107 women (including two made from wood and one with feathers),  
chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter.  
To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.  
Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.  
Answer for me.  
It was a way of taking the time to break up.  
A way of taking care of myself.*



a circle together, creating the frame around the shape of sponge. I like the idea of this being a collection of names, of memories the sponge absorbs and shows me. The sponge is painted on the outside, made hard and crusted, and the inside is soft like a belly, vulnerable. *Porous Painting (what's in a name?)* disarms the power of the individuals named in the piece by having them stuffed in the same place, between cushions of experience and healing wounds.



Thesis Installation at the Anderson Gallery, Richmond VA, April 2017

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(Sophie Calle, a catalogue titled *Take Care of Yourself* was published by Actes Sud in 2007.)



The paintings on canvas engage with a sense of experience, reflecting on imperfections and collected filth and particles that are washed and transferred to other tools for wiping. The sponges hold filth, and paint from the paintings, and accessories used and new. These feminine accoutrements are applied methodically, the works are crafted, and each one holds a different set of decorations.



Thesis Installation at the Anderson Gallery, Richmond VA, April 2017

The pieces are displayed on tiled tables, referencing store and counter displays and to the product and the body absorbing these qualifiers and costumes inside their holes. Marketing strategies used to sell us products, identities and lifestyles exploit our feelings

of inadequacy in quest for fullness and perfection. By studying and employing these strategies, one gains a power to divert influence. In my sponges I am adopting the vocabulary of product display and applying it to identity construction, gender, and sexuality through accessories and objects.

I am reeducating myself. Learning how to love with strategies of play, costume, dress up, and experimenting in material processes. I make my paintings and sculptures with expressive and emotional sensitivity, fast and slow pacing, creating bodily density and weight. The repetition of image, and revealing and covering up surfaces teases and denies the viewer. The pursuit contradicts itself, is flawed and in flux, and the process of making these works realizes the limitations of gaining autonomy through directing.

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15. Eileen Myles, "Being Female", *The Awl*, Feb 14, 2011.
16. Sophie Calle, a catalogue titled *Take Care of Yourself* was published by Actes Sud in 2007.

## List of Images (in order of appearance)

2. Zuleika Ponsen as 'Medusa' - By Pierre et Gilles, 1990
3. *Medusa Laughing*, 44 x 64 inches, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 2017
4. Still from 1970's "Happy Fuckday"
5. *Bushing (I Imagine Myself Deeply Loved)*, 25 x 30 inches, acrylic and rubber on canvas, 2016
6. Gina Beavers, Pictorial loves, 2015
7. *Licks*, 44 x 64 inches, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 2017
8. Crop of *Medusa Laughing*, 44 x 64 inches, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 2017
9. Julie Doucet "Dirty Plotte" issue #1, June 1992
10. Dorothy Iannone, Play it Again, Gouache on Paper, 2007
11. "The Early 2000's Popular Girl in High School starter pack" @thankxanax
12. CVS Advertisement
13. Photo of Kathy Acker with the Spice Girls during their 1997 Interview
14. Porous Paintings on table with various studio props
15. *Porous Painting (stained and soaking)*, 7.5 x 5.25 x 2.25 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2016
16. *Porous Painting (what's in a name?)*, 7.5 x 5.25 x 2.25 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2016
17. The jeweled skeleton of St. Benedictus, photo by Paul Koudounaris
18. Image of *Porous Painting (French Tips)*, 7.5 x 5.25 x 2.25 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2017
19. *Porous Painting (cranberry pills)*, 7.7 x 4.2 x 2 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2016
20. *Porous Painting (stained and soaking)*, 7.5 x 5.25 x 2.25 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2016
21. *Dickies*, 25 x 30 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2017
22. *Porous Painting (French Tips)*, 7.5 x 5.25 x 2.25 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2017
23. Porous Painting (handy), mixed media with sponge, 2016
24. Alter of Santo Niño, Mexico City, MX
25. Antique English Dollhouse
26. Studio image of *Porous Paintings* arranged
27. *July 2014*, 44 x 54 inches, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 2016

28. *Morning*, 44 x 54 inches, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 2016
29. *New Orleans*, 44 x 54 inches, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 2016
30. Source cell phone imagery of men for paintings
31. *Porous Painting (what's in a name?)*, 7.5 x 5.25 x 2.25 inches, mixed media with sponge, 2016
32. Still from video piece from Sophie Calle 'Take Care of Yourself'
33. Thesis Installation at the Anderson Gallery, Richmond VA, April 2017
34. Thesis Installation at the Anderson Gallery, Richmond VA, April 2017